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ABSTRACT

The success of "American Way," American Airline's in-flight magazine, comes from three major factors: the success of American Airlines itself, the high advertising revenue of the magazine, and the quality editorial material produced. Beginning in 1966, "American Way" has evolved from a brochure of flight information and travel tips to a profitable magazine with respected editorial content. Although in its early stages "American Way" counted on American Airlines for financial support, it has since become a profit-building publication, attracting advertisers of all kinds. In addition to advertising power, "American Way" speaks to an educated, affluent audience by showcasing quality work and professional design. Contributors to the magazine have included Isaac Asimov, James Beard, Norman Cousins, Richard Burton, Hugh Downs, Gloria Steinem, and James A. Michener. Of the 18 U.S. in-flight magazines, "American Way" stands alone with its quality editorial content, design, and readership, exceeding the profits of some of the most prestigious consumer magazines. (Two tables of data are included, and two pages of footnotes and 24 references are appended.) (MM)

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American Way's Flight Pattern

A Profile of American Airline's In-flight Magazine

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Since the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978, airlines have employed major marketing strategies to attract passengers. One of those strategies was the revamping of the in-flight magazine. By the early 70s, virtually every major airline used the in-flight magazine as a promotional tool. But as competition for low fares became more fierce, the airlines found their magazines needed to be more than just fluff to impress passengers. Some airlines were successful in transforming their overgrown brochures into superlative editorial publications. Others merely expanded upon the brochure by adding travel pieces and celebrity photographs. Many books folded after only a short flight-life, but *American Way*, the in-flight magazine for American Airlines, thrives. *American Way*'s success comes from three major factors: the success of American Airlines itself, the high advertising revenue of the magazine and the quality editorial material *American Way* produces.

In 1966, American Airlines joined the growing number of major airlines that were providing in-flight magazines. The early magazine contained flight information, travel tips, and the usual puffery of a company brochure. American's Sales Promotion Department was responsible for the magazine, but used an outside publishing company to produce the contents. About 1972, *American Way* was involved in a dispute between the publisher and its suppliers. George A. Spater, then president and chairman of American Airlines, decided that the magazine should move in-house. He wanted the magazine to be headed by a journalist with some legal training so that future disputes could be handled more smoothly. He recruited Glen

Walker as the magazine's first editor. Walker was writing the employee newsletter for American at the time, and attending law school at night.[1]

"I was at the right place at the right time," says Walker of Spater's offer.[2]

Walker assembled a small staff to produce the magazine, and *American Way* became the first and only in-flight published by an airline itself. The team established a mission for *American Way* that still stands today: to make the reader's flight as pleasant as possible. American's president reportedly kept a close watch on production, reading each issue and voicing his comments on every piece.[3] Spater later became editorial advisor for the magazine along with Norman Cousins of *Saturday Review*. The dedication and experience of that early editorial staff evidently paid off. Less than five years later, ad revenue was exceeding expenses, and the profits from *American Way* went to American Airlines.

The strength of American Airlines greatly supports the strength of *American Way*. Dallas/Fort Worth-based American Airlines has continually shown excellence in its performance and its economic stability. North American frequent fliers selected American Airlines number one in the world in an International Airline Passenger Association survey conducted this year.[4] The Department of Transportation ranks American Airlines number one in on-time flights for the months of September, October and November. Furthermore, American consistently has one of the fewest number of complaints for mishandled baggage.[5] Both of these attributes are

of major importance to travellers, and especially to the business traveller, who can ill afford delays and mix-ups.

Demographic profiles show that 65.5 percent of American Airlines' frequent flyers are men.[6] Women travellers account for 34.5 percent of American's business, a figure that is growing slowly. The business traveller is the airline's "bread and butter," says Gary Hardee, Executive Editor of *American Way*.

"They count on us to get them to that important meeting. American's commitment to being on time has given us a reputation of reliability. Let's face it, nobody likes to sit around in an airport--especially if you end up having to do it two or three times a week. I for one believe that the magazine has benefited from that," says Hardee.

Before *American Way* became a profit-building publication, it could count on the company for financial support. The beginning of almost every magazine venture is marked with the red pencil of debt. Until a magazine can attract enough readers to attract advertisers, the budget is frighteningly thin. As *American Way*'s staff worked to bring ledgers into the black, a steady supply of confidence and encouragement came from the owner. Modern office equipment, practically unlimited travel privileges, and an almost guaranteed audience are elements any magazine would covet. *American Way* also has the advantage of a strong corporate publisher who benefits directly from the magazine. The airline distributes the magazine to its prime market, every AA passenger, and the magazine promotes the

airline through editorial excellence. Their goals are separate, yet intertwined. It's the perfect symbiotic relationship.

Although one of American Airlines' original reasons for publishing *American Way* in-house was to keep a closer eye on its content, that rule has changed considerably.

"We now have practically no ties to top management," says Hardee. "They decided a long time ago that they couldn't control the editorial content too much or we would sound like an annual report. If we constantly throw in material that pushes American Airlines, we're not doing what we set out to do. We'd be fools to think otherwise."

Glen Walker points out that the wisdom of former AA president George Spater gave the magazine full editorial control.

"Mr. Spater believed in delegating authority, and once the delegation was made, he didn't interfere," says Walker. "One of the great things about being a part of this big corporation is that there are many divisions working on a specific part of the business. We have the freedom to carry out our function as we see fit, and collectively, we make the company even stronger."[7]

Now in its twentieth year of publication, *American Way* has become a very profitable magazine. Although it occupies an entire floor in American Airlines' sprawling headquarters complex, it more than pays its rent in advertising revenue. In 1986, *Folio* magazine named *American Way* one of

the top 25 consumer magazines in the United States. Those same figures showed *American Way* as having the second highest change in advertising pages from the previous year among consumer magazines. *American Way* was number one in advertising revenue in its individual category, magazines in the $10-25 million range, and number nine in overall revenue. [8]

"In the beginning, advertisers weren't interested in airline magazines because their image was closer to a brochure than a 'quality' publication," says Walker. "The task of that first young, gung-ho staff was to produce the kind of writing and design that would attract serious readers."[9]

These days, *American Way* attracts all kinds of advertisers. The largest number of ads come from hotels and resorts, accounting for 22 percent of the magazine's revenue. Business equipment companies such as AT&T and Xerox represent 14 percent of *American Way*'s ads. Service companies like American Express and Citibank account for 10 percent of the advertising. Personal goods, computers, and travel services make up 9 percent, 8 percent, and 6 percent of the ads, respectively.[10] The following table gives a complete breakdown of *American Way*'s advertisers, and the percentage of ads they represent in each issue:

American Way Advertisers 1986[11]

Category	# Companies	% Ads
Airlines/Aviation	4	1
Apparel/Jewelry	18	6
Automotive	7	2.4
Business Equipment	40	14
Business/Consumer Services	29	10
Car Rental	11	4
Computers	22	8
Direct Response	21	7.2
Entertainment & Restaurants	5	2
Foods	3	1
Hotels/Resorts	63	22
Liquor	4	1
Miscellaneous	10	3.4
Personal Goods & Services	26	9
Publishing/Media	8	3
Travel and Travel Services	18	6
Total	289	100

In his book, American Magazines for the 1980s, William Taft discusses the necessity of advertising to make a magazine profitable. He points out that the two most important factors in a magazine's profitability are advertising and circulation. Many magazines rely on both of these factors to meet costs of publication, and increase ad sales or cover price to generate revenue.[12] Not only is advertising revenue important to the magazine, but it is also very important to the advertisers themselves. He quotes a passage from one of Cahners Publishing Company's reports that summarizes advertising's role in the business world:

> *Advertising is the final link in the marketing chain supporting increased return on investment. Advertising of the proper frequency and quality, concentrated to give maximum exposure to primary prospects (specialized business magazine advertising), dramatically increases brand preference. The results are seen in increased sales dollars per call. Share of market improves and return on investment moves right up with it.*[13]

Many businesses decide to advertise in *American Way* because it delivers the type of audience its advertisers want to reach. It does so twice monthly, as *American Way* is the only in-flight to publish two issues per month. In turn, *American Way* depends on its advertisers to continue using the magazine as an ad vehicle because virtually all of its profits come from advertising. Because *American Way* is distributed free to all American Airlines passengers, its high circulation is only another way to attract ad dollars, not a way to generate magazine sales. *American Way* does have

subscribers, but they are so few that they make no significant contribution to the magazine's revenue.[14]

Mendelsohn Media figures for 1987 place *American Way*'s circulation at 1.3 million.[15] The magazine's pass-a-long readership has been estimated at more than 6 readers per copy. Of those six readers, four are men. MMR's demographic profile of the *American Way* reader is described as male, 42 years old, a college graduate in a professional or managerial position. He makes $50,000+ a year, and has a personal net worth of $250,000-499,999. He owns a home, typically worth $150,000-299,999. Ten times a year, the *American Way* reader travels on a commercial airline round trip. At least half of those trips are business-related. *American Way* readers use credit cards for travel purchases, and spent $1,000 or more last year on furniture, apparel, jewelry and artwork.[16] The table on the following page profiles the *American Way* reader.

Profile of the *American Way* Reader[17]

Sex	%
Male	65.5
Female	34.5

Age	%
18-34	23.9
35-49	47.5
50+	28.6
Median:	42.1

Education	%
College or beyond	59.8
Postgraduate study	8.7
Postgraduate degree	17.1

Occupation	%
Professional/Managerial	66.7
Executive/Administrative	53.2
Served on own or other company's Board of Directors	16.8

Household Income	%
$150,000+	16.2
$100,000-149,999	25.1
$75,000-99,999	22.2
$50,000-74,999	36.4
Median:	$ 90,300

Personal Income	%
$100,000+	16.2
$ 75,000	33.2
$ 50,000	56.6
Median:	$ 55,400

Net Worth	%
$1,000,000+	23.6
$ 5000,000-999,999	41.1
$ 250,000-499,999	26.1
Median:	$ 620,100

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Property Ownership	%
Own Residence	92.9
House Owned	87.7
Two or more residences	34.7
Other real estate holdings/ investments	49.0

Residence Value	%
$ 400,000+	12.8
$ 250,000-399,999	17.9
$ 150,000-249,999	29.3
Median:	$ 175,900

Travel in Past Year: Commercial Airline Round trips	%	% Business
1-4	21.4	20.1
5-19	45.4	45.4
20+	27.9	21.1
Median:	10.2	

Credit Card Ownership/Usage	%
American Express	24.2
VISA	20.3
MasterCard	19.9
Used Credit Card for Travel in past Month	86.3

Expenditures of $ 1,000+ Past Year	%
Furniture	52.6
Jewelry	26.8
Artwork & Collectibles	21.2
Men's Apparel	46.3
Women's Apparel	51.4

MRI reports in its Spring 1987 study that *American Way* is a favorite among in-flight readers. *American Way* also ranks second in readership by

professional managerial individuals behind *Fortune* magazine. Among business magazines, *American Way*'s cost-per-thousand is $89.30 compared to *Fortune*'s $88.31. Frequent travellers read American Way more than any other in-flight magazine. And *American Way* has the lowest cost-per-thousand for the Top 10 Passenger Markets among in-flights. No other in-flight comes close to *American Way* in delivering an audience. *American Way* captures an average of 64 percent of the market in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Washington D.C., Detroit, Chicago, Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. United Airlines is second with 50 percent; Delta and TWA each has 32 percent.[18]

A good magazine thrives on more than just advertising and circulation figures. *American Way* worked hard to earn the respect it now has with its readers and its advertisers as well. The magazine had to speak to an educated, affluent audience that was well-travelled and well-read. It approached this task with high goals: to showcase quality work, and to respect its readers more than it respected itself.[19] *American Way* has certainly earned its readers respect, and the respect of many others including journalistic associations, distinguished authors and poets, and the editors of other magazines. The quality editorial content of the magazine and its professional design make it an award-winning publication.

Perhaps one of the most surprising things about *American Way* is that it does not compete with other in-flight magazines. Executive editor Gary Hardee says that *American Way*'s major competition comes from publications like *Esquire, The Wall Street Journal, Fortune, USA Today, Newsweek, US News & World Report,* "popular novels, in-flight movies,

paperwork from the office, knitting--anything that keeps the passenger from reading our magazine."

How can an airline magazine be so presumptuous as to compare itself to the top magazines in the country? Because it provides "the best of the best," according to Hardee.

"We look better and we read easier. Our magazine is a joy to read. Nothing heavy or controversial, nothing totally depressing. We aren't 'Pollyanna-ish' by any means, but we want our readers to get pleasure from *American Way*. The last thing we'd want to do is ruin somebody's flight."

American Way features a variety of departments and subjects, pleasing just about any type of reader. The diversity comes from the magazine's early development, when the staff disagreed on what *American Way* should include. Glen Walker remembers it this way:

"While we shared objectives, we had our differences on the means of attaining them. George Spater enjoyed scholarly fare. Norm Cousins *(of Saturday Review. He acted as one of AW's editorial advisors)* looked to reader enlightenment. My staff and I leaned to name writers and popular subjects. It turned out to be a rich synergy."[20]

The diversity in subject preferences brought *American Way* a plethora of famous contributors. Since the fledgling magazine had such a tight budget, the majority of its content came from freelancers, and still does today. Author Granville Hicks did a monthly book review. Environmentalist

Cleveland Amory wrote an article about the coyote. Artist and critic Seldon Rodman wrote cultural features. Norman Cousins wrote a few articles himself--one a Bicentennial feature on the Founding Fathers, and one a photo essay on his hobby of photographing tree bark. Celebrity writers helped promote the magazines by lending their names to the cover. Actor Richard Burton wrote about Christmas in Wales; Hugh Downs wrote about learning.[21]

"We got the idea in 1974 to send letters to more than 100 notable Americans asking whether George Orwell's prophecy about 1984 was likely to come true in the next decade," says Walker. Among those who responded were Barry Goldwater, Gloria Steinem, James A. Michener, Faith Baldwin, and Bess Myerson.[22]

Other regular contributors came to the magazine without invitation. Isaac Asimov did a monthly column about science, and now serves as contributing editor of the magazine. James Beard wrote a column for years column about food. Walker says that *American Way* attracted such great writers because of its national audience of millions of passengers and a "properly worshipful staff of editors."[23] The excellence of writing also brought works from surprising sources. Walker tells the story of a poem submitted by a passenger flying from San Francisco to New York. It was signed "Mrs. Joseph W. Ballantine (L. Frost)." *American Way* editor Diana Jones contacted the woman, and found that she was the daughter of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Robert Frost. On what would have been his100th birthday, Lesley Frost Ballantine wrote a tribute to her father for *American Way*.[24]

Today's editorial content retains the diversity of the magazine's early days. The magazine added more departments and in-depth features to fatten the editorial content. American Way relies on a steady supply of query letters to fulfill its taste for the fresh and the unique. With ninety percent of the magazine freelanced, *American Way* employs only one full-time writer.

In each issue, a business article about trends, practices, or innovations appears. *American Way* publishes a profile of a leader of a successful company every month, and a profile of a sports figure as well. New trends in art and entertainment grace each issue, as does a book review and a fashion article. Travel articles focus on the culture and people of the destinations American Airlines services. A technology column appears each month, describing breakthroughs in industry, science, and medicine. There's a letters column, a food article, a crossword puzzle, and an opinion piece in every issue. The back of the magazine contains "corporate musts" (as Hardee calls them): an AA system map, passenger information, and in-flight entertainment guides.

Hardee says that in all articles, the staff looks for a "sense of place" that will carry the reader away from the stuffiness of an airplane. "We want to transport our passengers to another setting, and give them the feeling of being there without actually going. A good piece will do that with description, sleek prose, quality art, photos and graphics."

"The nature of magazine readers today makes strong visuals a major factor," says Hardee. "Visuals draw the readers in, and advertisers want

their ads next to quality editorials. It's very important to have sharp photos, brilliant colors. Looking good is just as important, if not more important than stimulating copy. People won't pick the book up if it doesn't *look* interesting."

According to Norman Wiener in a recent issue of *Folio*, one of the major trends in magazine publishing today involves a switch to heavier paper weights.[25] "This trend is based on the notion that the thicker the paper, the more expensive-looking the sheet," says Wiener. *American Way* has changed its paper weight several times, Hardee says, but airline regulations prevent them from getting too thick. Since only a certain amount of weight can go on every plane, the magazine cannot exceed a specific number of pages. The company charges the magazine for the weight it adds to the plane because extra weight uses more fuel.[26]

American Way went to a bi-monthly format to avoid the expense of exceeding the weight limit. "We wanted to be able to provide a number of fresh articles each month, and keep the magazine looking good. This way, we can keep the magazine full editorially, and use a medium weight paper that lasts at least two weeks," explains Hardee. "We prefer to spend our money on top writers and good photography. And of course, the staff likes a raise every now and then . . ."

Many magazines try to pare articles down to 500 words or less, according to publishing consultant John Peter.[27] Peter says that the businessman and the frequent traveller are likely to have a lot of magazines piling up at home, and a quick read will be appreciated. Hardee's staff

rejects this principle, and tries to have a variety of lengths in *American Way*.

"We don't worry about what the reader has at home to read. When they're on our airplane, they're a captive audience with sometimes as much as 13 hours to kill. We try to give them a choice with some really short pieces and a few really long ones. I think they appreciate the variety, and it doesn't lock us into a certain type of article," Hardee says.

A prime example of the less-is-more philosophy is United Airlines' newly revamped magazine. Now called *Vis a Vis*, the magazine sticks to one-page stories about celebrities, travel, food, and luxury items. The slick paper and oversized photos give *Vis a Vis* a popular appeal that is lauded by designers and art directors. The magazine looks good, but its editorial content leaves much to be desired by the serious reader. It goes for the trendy and the chic, things that *American Way* tries to avoid. As a result, *Vis a Vis* ends up reading like a *nouveau riche* version of *People*.

Butler Aviation's *Echelon* is another beautifully presented in-flight magazine. The oversized, slim publication has incredibly accurate color reproduction in its full-page photographs. The short articles and clean graphics give it the look and feel of a coffee table book. The November issue of *Echelon* was just 65 pages.

Pace magazine (for Piedmont Airlines) and *USAir* are approaching quality with solid features and interesting photographs. Each has the problem of poor color reproduction, however, which seems to detract from

the magazines' visual appeal. Too many ads per page is also distracting, making both books seem busy and cluttered. Eastern *Review* breaks up most of its advertising by varying the length from page to page. Its photography is a bit better than *Pace* and *USAir*, but it can't claim any glory for its editorial content. *Review* relies mainly on reprints from other magazines rather than original works.

Pan Am has the corner on international appeal, with interesting color graphics and unique features. They publish works of fiction and excerpts from best-sellers. In each issue there's likely to be a piece on the customs and culture of a certain country, or a story about its art or literary accomplishments. Southwest Airlines' *Spirit* caters to the southwest regional reader with articles on the Dallas Cowboys, the financial growth of Austin, Texas and L.A. business leader Maxene Johnston of Weingart Center.

Of the18 U.S. in-flight magazines, *American Way* has established a reputation for excellence. It stands alone in quality editorial content, design, and readership. Its profits exceed some of the most prestigious consumer magazines. It's won awards, received national acclaim among literary giants, and has become one of the most read magazines of the day. *American Way* has progressed into an important medium for our changing society. It represents the sophisticated, mobile, affluent citizen of tomorrow. As more and more magazine titles pop-up on the newsstand, *American Way* will continue to fly high where others never seem to take off.

Notes

[1] Glen Walker, "A Young Magazine Takes Off," *American Way*, 15 Dec. 1986, p. 50.

[2] Walker, p. 50.

[3] Walker, p. 51.

[4] *AAdvantage Newsletter*, American Airlines, Nov. 1987, p. 3.

[5] "14 airlines improve performances," *The Dallas Morning News*, 3 Dec. 1987.

[6] Gary Hardee, personal interview, 12 Nov. 1987.

[7] Walker, p. 51.

[8] all figures from this paragraph come from *Folio:400*, 1986, p.43, 61, and 78.

[9] Walker, p. 51.

[10] List of *American Way* 1986 Advertisers from "Your Most Powerful Advertising Vehicle," *American Way* Advertising/Circulation Report, 1987.

[11] *American Way* Advertising/Circulation Report.

[12] William H. Taft, American Magazines for the 1980s, New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1982, p. 326.

[13] from Cahners Advertising Research Report, *Commentary*, No. 2000. I, 1979. as cited in Taft, p. 326.

[14] Hardee.

[15] Hardee.

[16] from Mendelsohn Media Research (MMR), *American Way Reader Profile*, 1987 in *American Way* Advertising/Circulation Report, 1987.

[17] MMR.

[18] all of the statistics in this passage come from *IP Sharp/Department of Transportation Report,* 1986. as cited in *American Way* Advertising/Circulation report, 1987.

[19] Walker, p. 51.

[20] Walker, p 51.

[21] Walker, p. 52.

[22] Walker, p. 52.

[23] Walker, p. 52.

[24] Walker, p. 52.

[25] Norman Wiener, "Special Report: Magazine Paper," *Folio,* Dec. 1987, p. 112.

[26] Hardee.

[27] John Peter, *Vis à Vis:* Today's magazine of the future," *Folio,* Dec. 1987, p. 132.

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